

August 28th, 2022

Luke 14:1, 7-14 “Jesus Tells a Cringe-y Tale”

I’m not a fan of cringe comedy. What is cringe comedy you might ask? Well, lucky for us we have a definition from Joy Press who published an article in the *Village Voice* called “The Comedy of Cringe.” Press defines cringe comedy as “a subgenre of comedy that derives humor from social awkwardness, idiosyncratic humor and guilty pleasure.” The most popular cringe comedy television shows are *The Office* and *Parks and Rec*. She goes on to say, “Cringe comedy shows have elements of a reality TV show or a documentary. They revolve around a serious setting, such as a workplace, to lend the comedy a sense of reality. The protagonists are typically egotists who overstep the boundaries of political or cultural correctness and break social norms. The comedy will attack the protagonist by not letting them become aware of their self-centered view, or by making them oblivious to the ego-deflation that the comedy deals them. Sometimes an unlikable protagonist may not suffer any consequences, which, of course, violates people's moral expectations, and also makes the audience cringe.” Hence the label *cringe comedy*. I’ve watched two episodes of *The Office* and one episode of *Parks and Rec* because my friends insisted that they were “the funniest shows ever.” I didn’t like either one because they were both so ... cringe-y. I’m not sure whether I don’t like these shows because I see enough cringe-y things in real life, or maybe it just reminds me too much of my own “criney-ness” and I end up relating a little too well with the characters.

Here's a real-life practical example of a cringe-y moment that most of us have experienced in some way. You’re in a crowd and you notice someone waving at you. You don’t recognize them, but there they are waving at you and smiling. Now, I meet new people all the time, usually because someone I already know introduces me. “Oh this is my pastor” and I smile and greet the person warmly because ... that’s what pastors do, right? So when I see someone waving at me the first thing that goes through my mind is, “Oh my gosh, who is that and where did I met

them?” Then I think of how awkward it is when I fail to recognize someone I’ve met before and they’re disappointed that I can’t remember. So I think, “Well, I’ll smile and wave back and maybe by the time they make it across the room I’ll remember where I met them and we can work from there.” But every now and then someone will smile and wave at me, and I’ll smile and wave back and as I step forward to greet them it becomes clear that they waving at the person behind me and they usually give me a strange look as they walk by. That, my friends, is a cringe-y moment. Why would I want to watch that on TV when I can just go down to the Saturday market and experience it in real life?

This week’s scripture is a story that’s found only in Luke’s gospel. I wonder if the other gospel writers didn’t include it because it was so cringe-y. Makes me wonder if Luke would’ve been a fan of *The Larry Sanders Show* or *Curb Your Enthusiasm*? The setting for Luke’s story is a dinner hosted by a ruling-class Pharisee ... someone who had influence and status in his community. Jesus took advantage of the setting to tell a parable about what happens when you go to a wedding banquet and sit at the wrong table. When that happens, the host is put in the awkward position of having to tell the person, “I’m sorry, but this seat is reserved for someone who ... is ... not ... *you*.” Then the guest is put into the awkward and undignified position of having to get up, apologize for their social faux pas and move on. This is a real thing! This is *not* a first century middle eastern thing. This happens today.

I was at a wedding banquet once where they had little placards with people’s names on them at each of the tables. I went to the table where the father of the bride told me to go, and I sat down at the seat that I had been assigned. There I was, sitting in a chair behind a placard that had “Rev. Jesse Kearns” printed in bold type when one of the bride’s relatives came up to me and said in a condescending voice, “I’m sorry but *this* table is reserved for *family*.” And even though I had just been told by the bride’s father to sit at the table behind the placard that was clearly visible to this person who was calling me out, my heart stopped, and I thought, “Oh my gosh, I messed up! I don’t belong here!” Oh,

and did I mention that I *officiated* this wedding? Fortunately, the bride's father came to my rescue before I could say anything! But I still felt like I was the one who did something wrong. And the family member who called me out didn't seem the least bit repentant. In fact, she gave me the stink-eye for the rest of the evening! As Joy Price wrote, "The comedy will attack the protagonist by not letting them become aware of their self-centered view, or by making them oblivious to the ego-deflation that the comedy deals them." Apparently, the bride's auntie was the protagonist in this awkward little cringe comedy we were in.

Anyway, the solution that Jesus presented in his parable was, "If you're not sure where you're supposed to sit, sit at the peasant's table even if you are a person of status and know the host. That way when the host says, 'What are you doing over at that table, come on over and sit at mine,' you save face and avoid the awkwardness of being told to leave the table and the host saves face for not having to tell you to change seats." Now comes the question of the day – Why would Jesus tell such a cringe-y story and what's the takeaway lesson?

First of all, this is *not* a lesson about manners or etiquette. This is a *metaphor* for the Kingdom of God which shouldn't surprise us because that's what most of Jesus' parables are about. The table, in this parable, is a place where relationships are built and nurtured. That's what tables are all about. Studies show that families who eat together are healthier and that children, especially as teenagers, are less likely to engage in dangerous behaviors. The table is often a place where celebrations happen. It's where people gather as a community with a purpose. Some theologians say that Jesus' original intent for the church was not to build an institution, but rather a table. Which makes sense. He was the son of a carpenter after all.

In this story that takes place around a table, there are two lessons – One is for the guest and one is for the host. As I mentioned earlier, when a guest sits in the wrong seat, it's awkward for both the guest and the host. With a few exceptions, nobody really wants to be in either of those

positions. For the guest, Jesus says the best thing to do if you're not sure where to sit is take the place of least importance at the table. That way, if the host wants you to take a place of more importance it's not awkward for *either* of you. Everybody feels good about it. Jesus draws from Proverbs 25:6-7 to support his point: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." Now we've got to be careful here, because this a call for people to practice genuine humility. See, some people might use this lesson as a strategy to weasel their way into a better seat. Fred Craddock in his commentary on this parable says, "Jesus does not offer a divinely approved way for a person to get what he or she wants. Taking the low seat because one is humble is one thing; taking the low seat as a way to move up is another. This message becomes a cartoon if there is a mad, competitive rush for the lowest place, with ears cocked toward the host, waiting for the call to ascend." Humility is about awareness of others beyond yourself. Being humble is not *denying* your own power or ability or prestige, but acknowledging that others have *equal* power, ability and prestige. In other words, you are not assuming that you are more important than others.

Then there's the lesson for the host who, I might add, is *not* the bad guy in the story. Sometimes we think that Jesus always paints the wealthy person as the bad guy. That is not the case here. However, the wealthy person *is* held to a standard that is counter intuitive to the culture of that time and place. The Roman empire operated firmly in a quid pro quo system. Everything was about the exchange of one thing for another. That's how the Roman patronage operated. No freebies for anyone for any reason. That would upset the Roman status quo. Yet Jesus' lesson for the host was, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Now, the die-hard first-century Roman patriot would say, "Whoa, wait a minute, why *shouldn't* I expect someone to invite me to *their* table someday if I've opened *my* table to them? That's the rule of Rome.

Where's the reciprocity? That's the way it's supposed to be." Not according to Jesus. He says that you should open your table to those who *can't* repay the favor. Why? Because, as Jesus says, "You will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Oh, that old song and dance! "You better do good because God's watching you. Listen, that logic is for chumps. This is a dog-eat-dog world, and only losers do good things without expecting something in return. But here you are saying, 'Yeah, but there *may* be a reward for you in heaven.' Give me a break." Except ... I don't think that's where Jesus is going with this. I don't think Jesus is promising a pie-in-the-sky reward so as to manipulate people into doing good because there's some *heavenly* reward waiting for them. Listen, if you're good at manipulating others, you can get people to do either really good things or really awful things using this 'carrot and stick' logic. What Jesus is doing here is calling us to practice radical, bold humility. Jesus wants us to consider how we might invite others into the kind of authentic humility which acknowledges our gifts, abilities and power, but doesn't assume that those gifts, abilities and powers somehow place us higher above others. Maybe a simpler way of framing that is, "Can we own who we are without placing ourselves above others?"

I like how this parable takes place around a table. We just spent 8 weeks talking about how the table is so central to our faith and practice, but I think it's important to remember that ministry doesn't just take place at this table. We have other tables too. Bunko tables. "Guess whose coming to brunch" tables. Crafting tables. Healing Circle tables. Virtual tables. Grief support tables. Picnic tables. These are opportunities for us to invite others to the table who may not be able to return the favor. It's easy for us to look back in time and point our fingers at "those silly Romans and their quid pro quo worldview," but we've also got to recognize that we aren't always the heroes or protagonists in the situation. Unless it's a cringe comedy and then we're just clueless. Sometimes *we're* the Romans. Sometimes we're the

grumpy auntie at the banquet table. We just don't recognize it. May this table and all our tables here at First Christian Church be distinguished by authentic humility and revolutionary hospitality.